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Dykhous, Rient and Helen Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Oral History Interview
Michigan History – Spring 2000
Interviewee: Rient and Helen Dykhouse
Interviewer: Tim Soper
4 April 2000

TS: What part of the Netherlands are you from?

RD: We are from the northern part of the Netherlands. As far north as you can go just about.

If you got a little further north you end up in the sea.

TS: What was it like around there, the land, landscape?

RD: Where we come from it is strictly farm community. No other industry in the particular area at all. So everyone was working for the farmers.

TS: Is that what you worked for to?

RD: I worked for a farmer for several years then I started working for a building contracted to learn a trade besides working for a farmer. Worked during the day and went to night school during the wintertime for six months, four times a week. So you worked during the day and went to school at night.

TS: What's that?

HD: On a bike.

RD: On a bike. So it was on a bike I would say about six miles one way.

TS: What age did you think about immigrating to the U.S.?

RD: We started think about it when we were 18 because Helen had a sister living her and things were not well over there to find a good job. The opportunities were not there and her sister encouraged us to come to this country. We thought about it and made up our mind and shortly after that we came to this country.

HD: In October, 1953.

RD: Yes that is right.

TS: What concerns did you have about leaving your home country?

RD: Well of course when you go to a new country you don't know the language. You are kind of worried about that for instance that you can not talk to anybody. We did have a few lessons in the old country but that did not mean much and leaving home, we never left home before and then go 4000 miles away to a complete strange country, it's kind of scary.

TS: How did you get to the United States?

RD: We came here by boat. We were on a boat for ten days. Went from Rotterdam, to...

HD: Hoboken.

RD: Yeah but we made one stop in France then we went to Hoboken, by New York there. That took 10 days.

TS: Was it a good trip or was there bad weather?

RD: The trip, when we left Rotterdam to France was fine, because you were not in the ocean. We thought we were going to have a great time but as soon as we left France, and got in the ocean we got sick the rest of the trip. We lost about ten pounds in ten days when we came here and we were terrible, terrible seasick. They could have thrown us over board and we would have never known the difference. That's how sick we were. And then we had our oldest girl, she was two years old so you have to attend to her also and being sick, so it was not a fun trip at all.

TS: Were there a lot of people on the boat?

RD: There were about ah, let's see how many were there? I think there was about 600 people

on the boat and 400 got off the boat in Canada. I missed that part because we went over Canada first. And then to the United States. So 400 people went off the boat in Canada, and only 200 went on to the United States. Because it was easier to get into Canada then to the United States. In the United States you had to have a sponsor, that sponsors you before you can enter this country.

TS: Did everyone in your family come?

RD: No, none of my family came here. Helen's sister was here and later on she had two or three yeah three more sister come here. After several years, her folks came here also. Personally from my side of the family nobody ever showed.

TS: Why did you choose the U.S. and not Canada? What attracted you?

RD: Because Helen had a sister here and from what were heard it was a better place in the U.S. then in Canada. We heard stories from Canada and a lot of people had second thoughts about going to Canada at that time.

TS: Where did you go first in the U.S. and describe your impressions of that place?

RD: When we landed in Hoboken, we were scared. We had never seen any black people. And being on a boat for ten days, in a way we were happy to get off and on the other hand it was a whole new world open to us and it was a kinda scary.

HD: And then it was two days in a train.

RD: After we left New York we had to be in a train for two days.

TS: And then where did you end up?

RD: Grand Rapids and we have been here ever since.

TS: Why did you pick Grand Rapids?

RD: There again on account of Helen's sister was living here.

TS: What did you think of Grand Rapids when you first got there? What did it look like?

RD: Well of course we did not have any imagination about what this country was all about so everything was kind of strange and we were looking at, we were used to looking at all brick homes and everything was kind of different to us and kind of strange at first.

TS: Could you describe some problems you had adjusting to life here?

RD: Of course one of the biggest barriers was that you couldn't talk to anyone. Besides that we never went from home before and I got terrible home sick. I was home sick for about six months and had a awful had time. I cried a lot, I wanted to go home, back to the old country. But I knew there was no way to get back and finally after six months I started adjusting to this country and its been great ever since.

TS: What aspects of life were different from your hometown? You mentioned the houses, maybe the people?

HD: The food, the people, the church. We went to church but, all we could understand "Amen" and we knew that church was over. That's all we knew.

TS: How long did it take you guys to start learning the language?

RD: I would say that to speak a little bit you know when you try to learn a language you start talking to kids to see if they can understand you because you don't want to be embarrassed. So I would say a couple years before you could make a conversation with someone.

HD: You understand it first before you can speak it. Because you are scared stiff that you were going to say it wrong for one.

RD: And the other impression I had when I came here, of course I started in the building trade here and that was completely different from Europe. So there was a big change. I had a

little schooling, and did some work in the old country in the building business but when I came here I didn't know nothing. From how they did things here. So there was a kind of shock. I thought I knew a little bit but it turned out I had to start from scratch again.

TS: Where were you first employed?

RD: I was employed by Vandenberg Construction.

TS: Was it difficult to find employment?

RD: No, you only looked for a couple days to find a job and we were successful. I did get layed off in the winter. Then I started to work for Keeler Brass Company. And I stayed there, I worked there at nights, and I worked there for ten years at night. During the day I was doing part time work in the construction business because I wanted to be on my own and start building houses on my own. Which later on I succeeded to do so.

TS: You went into this a little bit but, how did the move affect your family? Did you talk to them back home at all?

HD: The family that stayed behind, the effect was terrible. Just terrible because we were leaving, the planes were not going like they are used to now. You went by boat for ten days and that was the other side of the world. So when we left it was like a funeral for our parents.

TS: What about you guys? You said you were homesick, how was that? How did you manage to get over that?

RD: Well, I was personally homesick for about 6 months and tried to get used to it and it went on and on finally I got interested in ice hockey and somebody took me to ice hockey several times. By the time, after three or four months, the weather started to get nice, and I slowly adjusted to this country. But it took some doing.

HD: Because the ice hockey was like the Dutch football. Rient knew the rules from the Dutch football, more or less ice hockey is the same thing except on ice but the rules are the same. That's why he got interested.

RD: Finally after 6 months, after saving some money because I was planning on to go back to the Netherlands. By that time we had our money together, I got adjusted to it and for that money what we had saved I bought my first car. We had a great time with that. From then on it went considerably better, then what we were used to. The first 6 months were tough but after that it went good. And has been good ever since we been here and we been here now for 40 some years.

HD: 49 I guess.

RD: 49 years almost. Never had a day out of work, always work. Never been on unemployment or anything else. During the time when we worked at Keeler too, I was working during the day, we discussed that too. I wanted to be on my own.

HD: You had to walk to Keeler though, because at that time we had no car so he had to walk down there at 4 o'clock and walk also back at 2 o'clock in the morning. We didn't have no car. So you walked who knows how many miles, from Chairman street to Keeler Brass, probably who knows about 9 miles by Grandville Ave. That's what it was.

RD: It was probably we walked about an hour and a half.

HD: Something like that and then later on you had a ride from someone who was immigrated and he had a car and later on they would pick up Rient.

TS: What traditions did you bring with you that are still part of your family?

HD: Food. Some of the food not a lot. And the language of course, we still talk Dutch once in a while, not a lot but still we do.

RD: I don't know what to say about that, we don't well some families that come here that insist on that their kids learn how to talk Dutch, and we never did that. So our kids talk somewhat Dutch but very little. Of course they can understand more then what they can talk. But other wise as far as the Dutch heritage, we don't participate in that a lot. We focus more on this country then the old country because we came here on at a young age and I think that makes a difference. Some come here when they are 40-45 years-old and they keep more of the heritage then we do.

TS: Is there any little things like you build windmills and stuff, does that just bring back memories is that why you do that?

RD: Well it brings back some memories because when I was a kid, during WWII we did not have school because the Germans took over the school and they had to get set up with their troops. So we were roaming the streets. At that time I worked in a windmill for a while. Basically for fun. It was kind of, right now I built a windmill but it is just a challenge for me to do something like that. More so then memories.

HD: But still the windmill that you grew up with. That's exactly, exactly duplicate with what we grew up with.

TS: We touched on this a little but what were some of the most difficult adjustments that you had to make?

HD: Language, language is the biggest barrier.

RD: That was the biggest barrier you had to go through. Otherwise I was in the building like I mentioned before I mean it is completely different then building in Europe. Besides that, its a lot of things you have to learn, you go to church, church is different, Helen mentioned the food is different. It is basically a whole process of

different things you have to get used to.

HD: And the Pastor says “Amen” and oh boy you could go because in the mean time you didn't understand a word what the guys was saying. Then another Dutch guy, that was Will Flickama at one time and he says um, did you know what was communion? No, we didn't know the word communion so you don't understand it so you don't go. But you learn little by little in the regular street language or the regular language or the Bible language is two completely different to yet. So you have to learn the Bible language to what it meant.

TS: When you moved to Grand Rapids was there ever any times you thought about leaving it?

RD: No, since we came here, no we never had.

HD: Well you did because you were homesick at first but not later on. No I never wanted to leave.

RD: But after we came here as far as moving to I don't know what you are referring to, moving to a different city in the US?

TS: Like city or state

RD: No, we never had a urge or even thought about moving out of Michigan or out of Grand Rapids.

TS: You mentioned this, Do you have a church affiliation?

HD: Yes, Christian Reformed because, there was in Dutch, it was the closest to us, the Christian Reformed

TS: How do you feel about the Dutch heritage that Holland has tried to preserve, Holland Michigan?

HD: Oh, I think to me, I think that is great because that was the first settlers were in Holland in

the 1700's by VanRaalte I remember reading that book. Anyone had a tough time they had one then but all those Klompen dancing and I think that is great. We used to go to school in wooden shoes all are life long in school years we walked in wooden shoes. That's how we grew up.

RD: If they were a little big you stuff in some hay.

HD: Yeah, that's right you stuffed in a little hay if they were too big. And if you wanted a new pair, what I did I just kicked them up in the air and you thought you would get new ones well you didn't get new ones. Rient had a Opa then Opa had a wire, metal wire and would just have tiny little nails in there and I would have to wear my shoes.

RD: I remember a thing yet to that I had a uncle in the old country, in the Netherlands, he was, he made wooden shoes, that was his trade. So if I would get a pair of new wooden shoes I would have to go there and get a tree and cut down a piece of a tree, help him cut it down, I cut a piece off the tree and he would start that, dry it out and make a pair of wooden shoes for me.

TS: You guys said that you have been to tulip time once, could you describe your feelings towards it? Did you think it well represented the Holland culture?

HD: Yeah, especially the dress code, that's the Holland, Holland old dress code of course my grandma, my grandma used to wear cloths like that like they wear now like the parade and stuff like that in Holland. She had white cap, all lace. The gold curls on the side you know that was real gold and that was here regular, her regular dress.

RD: That was before our times though. When we came here the dress code was not that anymore in the Netherlands either. But otherwise, I think it is a good thing that they have it, a lot of people go there but we been there once or twice and that's the extent

of it for us.

TS: Have you experienced any discrimination while you have been here in Grand Rapids?
When you first came here?

RD: Yeah to a certain extent I would say, basically it happened more so when I was working for Keeler Brass. People would call you DP meaning displaced person which was not true. Other things, you worked at Keeler Brass and it was all piece work and they would usually give the new immigrants a job which you could hardly make any money on. You had to work your head off to make some money. Some bad language that I don't want to repeat now but it did happen but you know things like that, you just figured that's the way it was in those days. I didn't think too much of it. So I got over it and wasn't too much bothered by it.

TS: What paths have your children taken? After you have come over here and they have grown up what paths have they taken?

RD: Well by that time when they grew up, by that time I was full time in the building business working for myself. So we had one daughter and two sons. And the two sons went into the building business also. They both are in the business at this time yet. And I imagine that had a lot to do with me being in the building business.

HD: And in the summertime they had to help you and when school was out they would help you in the summertime.

RD: They seemed to like it so they stuck with it.

TS: Do they speak any Dutch?

HD: The oldest one does. Understands everything, but speaks brokenly. But the other two sons no not really, words here and there, some words not sentences. No sentence from

Bern or Rich.

RD: They do understand a lot but they can't talk it.

HD: Bern understands more then Rich does because at that time when Bernie was growing up we spoke more Dutch then when Rich was growing up. Then when Rich was growing up we where here 10-15 years. So then you knew a little bit more.

RD: Some family, they keep talking Dutch at home but we never made them practice. The longer we got here the more we talked English. Also to the kids it's easier for the kids that we talk English.

HD: It was actually when Herma would come home from school with friends, Mom speaks Dutch, I mean speak English don't speak Dutch speak English otherwise they can not hear you. That's how you know so but otherwords, when she came home with friends you would speak English. Good or bad or in-between whatever it was.

TS: What would you say to a friend that was considering moving to the US?

RD: Well I would encourage them based on what I experienced, of course we discussed the first 6 months but beyond the that this country has been real good to us. Always had enough to eat always had a job. You made a lot of progress we built a few houses for our selves sold them again and slowly got ahead a little bit. The opportunities here in this country are a lot better then in Europe, you can accomplish a lot more here with out all kinds of schooling. In Europe, in order to get a good job or be on your own you have to have all kinds of diplomas for this that and what have ya. In this country things are a lot easier that way in order to, if anyone wants to work for themselves, all's they have to do is make up your mind and go at it. And you can do it.

HD: You can't do that over there.

RD: You cant do that in Europe no.

HD: A lot of people immigrated just because right after WWII it was just bad, just bad, there was nothing after WWII. No jobs no, you were all rationed, your food was rationed you were five in your family, its just like food stamps now a days. Everyone was rationed in those days. You got stamps according to your family. Because there was a limit food after WWII. People in southern Holland, even during war time ate rats, mice, and cats and this is what they ate to survive. Not to starve. We didn't starve because we had a garden, we didn't live in the city. That made all the difference in the world. People in Rotterdam, I had a uncle that died, got bombed on in 1939, he got killed.

RD: I was just thinking back, what those, back in those days when I started working for a contractor, I was working 50 hours a week and I got my first pay check and it was \$5. Made a dime an hour. For working a whole week. It doesn't make any difference in Europe the system is different again, you don't get paid for what you know, if you get a year older or you know anymore or not automatically you get a raise. Now out here it's a little different. If you prove yourself, that you can and show what you can do you get paid accordingly. Which is I think is a good system. But in Europe it doesn't make any difference if you get a year older and you don't have full pay unless you are 21 years old before you get full pay, or 23. Yeah it was 23. So there was a lot of different things in Europe and the US. I still like this system a lot better then what they had in Europe.

HD: Talking about WWII...

HD: You were not supposed to listen to radios because you kinda knew where the Germans where and where they were not. So anyway, Opa put it in his book that he sold his radio because he was a businessman, he put it in his books and this is how much money

you got and this is how you sold it. Well he was lying. Because he was so against the Germans, they were not going to get his radio. So he built an opening in a space above a linen closet. Wouldn't ya know we got inspected. And his heart about stopped. The Germans could come in just like that and you had, you had what did they call not house well anyway, they went through your house and to see once if they could find anything. They never found anything but Opa got scared. He went in the middle of the night got the radio and went to his friend in the next city about 5 miles away. He hid it for him. Wouldn't you know, the next day that guy had the Germans come to his house. So he got scared, so he said you better pick up your radio again because I don't know if they are coming back or not. So then finally he went to a blacksmith and he had a metal cabinet made. He put the radio right in there and soldered it shut and dug a whole in the garden and sunk the radio right in there. Then later on in spring, vegetables grew over top of it. As kids, we were 11 or 12, 13 years old we didn't know anything about that because we might tell somebody. First thing Opa did, I still can see him go to that radio, isn't that funny. I can still see him go to that radio and take that radio out. But in the mean time, he got picked up once because the Germans didn't believe him. So he went about 10-20 miles, they took him away. We didn't know if we were ever going to see him again because he was being questioned because they didn't believe him because right across the street from us there was a Nazi person and we always knew they the Sikkemas, they were the meanest people. We know they would always listen if Opa was listening to a radio or not. They knew we had one so but anyway, Opa was freed after being questioned for a whole day. Then he got back. If the milk man would come on the house, I would see that milk man yet coming around and we were just having inspections from the Germans and there was only one, and that was Tina and she had to go with the German to the milk man, so she didn't say what was going on or anything like that. It was a

very scary time especially for our parents. Fear, fear was just something else. Fear of being bombed, fear of, we would sit in hallways sometimes in the sirens would go off. That was a scary time.